

Culturally-Appropriate Crisis Intervention for Karen Families in Ramsey County



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Methods with Families

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Resilient Communities Project

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DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE A "HEAVY HEART"?

RAMSEY COUNTY CRISIS SERVICES
AND THE KAREN COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2019 Spring Semester, Social Work 8352: Intervention Methods with Families took part in a Resilient Communities Project to gather information in the hopes of finding recommendations to give to Ramsey County to increase their effectiveness in working with the Karen population during times of mental health crisis. To gather information and provide recommendations, this master's level class worked in three teams: Research, Outreach, and Data.

FOCUS STATEMENT

"OUR CLASS COMMITS TO AN ANTI-RACIST, ANTI-OPPRESSIVE RESEARCH STANCE IN WHICH WE WILL GATHER DATA FROM STAKEHOLDERS INCLUDING THE KAREN COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS REGARDING NEEDS AND STRENGTHS WITHIN THE FAMILY SYSTEM AS THEY RELATE TO CURRENT BARRIERS TO CULTURALLY-DEFINED WELLNESS"



RESEARCH

The principles of anti-oppressive practice and community based participatory research guided this class's approach to research. Recognizing that our goal was to surface our community partners' knowledge, we wrote a series of open-ended questions for the outreach team to apply to their unique conversations. When we as community of researchers respect that the story our partners tell is not necessarily the story we came to hear, we open ourselves up to deeper and more meaningful learning. This was the case in this project where our research process was more about listening than talking.

We began this process conceptualizing the Karen community as both the patient population in Ramsey County and as our clients for this project. However, due to a combination of IRB limitations, confidentiality concerns, and potential for structural change, our interviews brought us deeper into the community and culture of service providers in Ramsey County. We re-conceptualized our client as Ramsey County and the ecosystem of providers serving the Karen Community. In this way, our process of inquiry attempted to shift from blame to curiosity.

OUTREACH

With a rich question bank informed by our research team and an anti-oppressive lens, the outreach team set out to learn from Ramsey County community members including: service providers, educators, and practitioners. Our goal was to deepen our understanding of how crisis services are perceived, utilized, and implemented in Ramsey County through the lens of service providers. Over 26 hours of interview content was collected from interviews with 13 individuals. This qualitative data guided us as we continued the work of identifying core themes and recommendations. Our hope is that through these interviews, Ramsey County could hear the powerful narratives of the individuals working most intimately with the Karen Community.

DATA

The data team then reviewed the interviews and synthesized the data into four prominent and overarching themes. It is important to acknowledge the limitations to the data. The greatest limitation is the lack of external validity; therefore, these results cannot be generalized. The themes discussed in the next section are limited to the views of the 13 interviews conducted. We believe this information to be rich and helpful. However, more research is needed to confirm themes and discover missing information.

THEMES

COUNTY SERVICES OPERATE WITHIN A WESTERN FRAMEWORK

A large overarching theme that was gleaned from these 13 interviews emphasized the ways in which Ramsey County's western framework does not match up with the cultural orientation of their Karen service recipients. While our research focus was oriented towards recommendations for Ramsey County Crisis, these findings were consistent across multiple county services including probation and child protection.



One interviewee stated, *"We are trained in a western way to work with non-western families and children."* A large concern was noted around this cultural misalignment is that the county, and the Karen families and children interacting with the county during times of crisis, use different language and conceptualizations to describe their situation. With limited interpretation services and few Ramsey County employees who speak Karenic dialects, workers responsible for addressing the crisis are left feeling ill-equipped and those served by the county are left feeling un-helped. Beyond a limitation in communication through language services, county workers also demonstrated and reported a lack of broad understanding of Karen culture and Karen notions of health and mental health.

PARALLEL PROCESS: HELPLESSNESS WITH A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

County service providers conveyed a sense of helplessness in feeling ill equipped to adequately meet the needs of their Karen clients. These feelings of helplessness result in attitudes of frustration towards this population, with one county employee reporting that he felt his *Karen families needed a lot of "hand-holding" and another suggesting they would benefit from more "acculturation."* Some individuals who work in the county reported feeling that their jobs are made more difficult by Karen families that do not know enough about the systems they are navigating.

This mentality puts the burden of responsibility of understanding on those receiving county services, which in turn leaves those individuals and families in a position of helplessness with no understanding of the systems in which they are operating. By placing the responsibility of understanding onto families, the responsibility of county workers to have cultural curiosity in their work is limited. If the burden of responsibility for understanding is instead shifted onto the county in their understanding of their client populations, instead of on families to understand the county systems, county workers may approach their work with more cultural curiosity and hopefully feel more effective providing services.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICES AVAILABLE

WITHIN THE COUNTY

It has been reported that employees within Ramsey County are unaware of the mental health crisis resources that Ramsey County provides. In an interview, one individual stated that they do not have much interaction with Ramsey county crisis and if they are working with someone who is in acute crisis, *they call 911*. In addition, there seems to be the perception that Ramsey County is unable to adequately provide crisis services. There is the sentiment within the county that it is unclear how Ramsey County is providing crisis services, resulting in a lack of referrals to the crisis team.

COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The feeling within the community is that Ramsey County as a whole has not put forth the necessary effort to build connections with the Karen community. *Karen individuals who have no relationship with the county are unlikely to reach out to them in a time of crisis.* In speaking about Ramsey County, one interviewee who has done extensive work within the Karen community stated, *"They need to be less of a stone-faced bureaucratic institution to try and get through."* Many of the individuals that were spoken with, mentioned that the county needs to do a better job making themselves and their services known. There is a consensus that the county needs to put forth an effort to form relationships with the Karen community under positive circumstances to have an impact in the community aside from responding to crises.



THEMES CONTINUED

INCONGRUENT FRAMEWORKS ACROSS SYSTEMS

Karen individuals' mental health needs are not being properly identified as they enter through the following systems: probation, child protective services (CPS), and emergency departments. One interviewee noted that Karen youth are single offenders, making it hard to follow up and assess. Another interviewee stated that many Karen individuals are misunderstood by others, resulting in CPS involvement with Karen families due to reports of substance use and domestic violence, adding there is a high prevalence of PTSD and depression. It was identified by Ramsey County service providers that when chemical dependency is identified, it is seen as the main issue and the mental health needs of these individuals are often not met. Additionally, it is perceived that Karen individuals access emergency medical services in response to somatic symptoms. One provider described folks reporting a *"heavy heart"* for sadness. One provider observed that hospitals are discharging Karen individuals as they do not understand how to help these individuals, possibly missing an opportunity to identify and address mental health crisis needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the information gathered during this project, this class proposes the following recommendations:

- *MORE INTERNAL COLLABORATION ACROSS RAMSEY COUNTY SERVICE PROVIDERS, INCLUDING EDUCATION AROUND WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE ACROSS RAMSEY COUNTY AND FROM EXTERNAL SERVICE PROVIDERS*
 - *Partnering with other county service providers such as probation, child support, and youth engagement to inform them of the services provided by the crisis team, including how to refer individuals*
 - *More education across county service providers about external referrals available to support families*
- *MORE COMMUNITY BUILDING AND OUTREACH OUTSIDE OF TIMES OF CRISIS BETWEEN RAMSEY COUNTY CRISIS AND KAREN COMMUNITY*
 - *Work on and maintain contacts with community leaders including Karen Organization of Minnesota and religious leaders*
 - *Have county workers attend Karen Organization of Minnesota bi-monthly Karen culture presentations and seek other opportunities to participate in cultural and community events and celebrations*
- *INCREASED EFFORTS TO HIRE KAREN INTERPRETERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS, POTENTIALLY ENGAGING KAREN YOUTH BY PROVIDING PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT WITHIN RAMSEY COUNTY IN GENERAL, AND RAMSEY COUNTY CRISIS IN PARTICULAR*

SPECIAL THANKS

This project would not have been possible with the following community members who gave us their time and knowledge:

Ramsey County, Karen Organization of Minnesota, Century College, Wilder Foundation, University of Minnesota: Duluth, University of St. Thomas, Roselawn Medical Clinic, LEAP High School, and Mike Greco from the Resilient Communities Project.

Do You Know What It Means to Have a "Heavy Heart"?

The Relationship Between Crisis Services
and the Karen Community in Ramsey County

SW 8352: Interventions with Families
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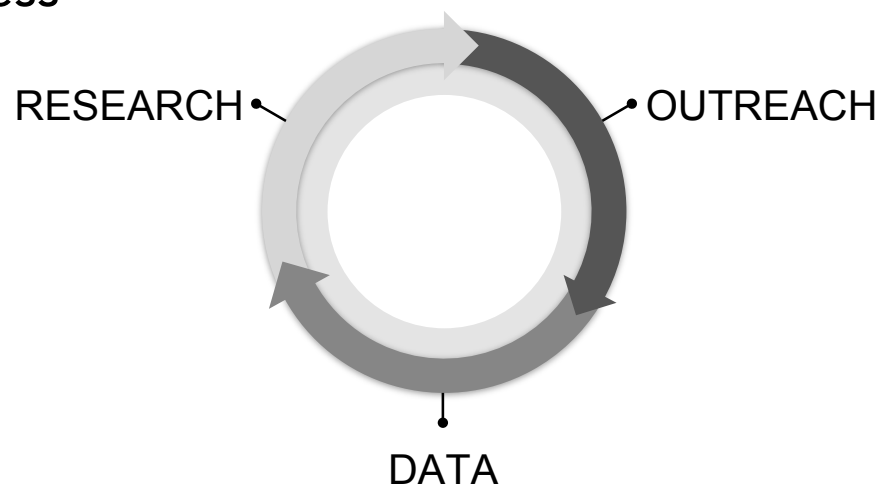
HOW

What was our process?

Focus Statement

“Our class commits to an anti-racist, anti-oppressive research stance in which we will gather data from stakeholders including the Karen community and community members regarding needs and strengths within the family system as they relate to current barriers to culturally defined wellness”

Process



Who is the client?

We began this process conceptualizing the Karen community as our client. The research process taught us more about the culture, community, and structure of Ramsey County as it relates to the populations it serves.

Principles of Community-Based Participatory Research

1. Recognizes **community as a unit of identity**.
2. Builds on strengths and resources within the community.
3. **Fosters collaboration, co-learning, and capacity building** among all partners.
4. Integrates and achieves a balance between knowledge generation and intervention for the mutual benefit of all partners.
5. **Disseminates results to all partners** and involves them in the wider dissemination of results.
6. Involves a **long-term process** and commitment to sustainability.
7. Openly addresses issues of race, ethnicity, racism, and social class, and embodies **cultural humility**.
8. Works to ensure research rigor and validity but also seeks to **broaden the bandwidth of validity**

Sources: 1-6, Israel et al., 2010 and 2005; 7-8, Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008

Writing Questions: Qualitative

- How do you define crisis?
- Who is responding to crisis?
- How are they responding?
- Why are they responding that way?
- What are the outcomes?
- Where can Ramsey County serve in the existing crisis response?

Writing Questions: Quantitative

- How does your agency partner with Ramsey county crisis services?
- What are the types of services your agency provides to the Karen population?
- Does your agency have someone who speaks Karen Dialects?
- What types of health and wellness services would be most beneficial for the Karen community?
- How does your agency respond to crisis?

Strengths and Limitations

- Social work students interviewing social service providers presented with deep curiosity about the work
- Power of collaboration to find community based solutions to complex problems
- Commitment to continuing this work beyond the confines of this project
- Our research only includes the voices of service providers
- Time constraints limited our ability form deep relationships with providers and community members

WHO

Who did we interview?

Methods for Outreach

- Interview contacts came from Nikki and Brian, our partners at Ramsey County
- We met with 13 of the 17 contacts we received
- Our goal was to conduct interviews in pairs for accountability and reflection purposes
- Interviews were audio-recorded or transcribed by hand
- Interviews were roughly 60 minutes long

Who we Interviewed

Providers at Wilder, Ramsey County Probation, Ramsey County Child Protection, Ramsey County Child Support, a Roselawn Medical Clinic provider, educators from St. Paul College, University of Minnesota Duluth and St. Thomas professor, Ramsey County Youth Engagement workers and a school social worker.

FINDINGS

What did we learn?

Themes

1. County services operate within a Western framework
2. Parallel process of helplessness with a mutual lack of understanding
3. Lack of understanding of services available
4. Incongruence of frameworks across systems

County Services Operate Within a Western Framework

“We are trained in a western way to work with non-western families and children”

Parallel Process of Helplessness With a Lack of Understanding

- County service providers feel ill-equipped to adequately meet the needs of their Karen clients
- Operating framework - Karen clients don't know enough about the systems they are navigating
- Alternative framework - County workers don't know enough about the cultural orientations their clients are coming in with in order to provide adequate services

Lack of Knowledge of Services Available

- Unknown by county employees
 - Probation officer reported calling 911
 - Unsure how crisis services are operating
- Unknown within the community
 - County has not adequately partnered with the community members
 - Services are not simply not know

Incongruence of frameworks across systems

- Karen individuals mental health needs are not being properly identified
 - Entering through:
 - Probation
 - Child Protective Services
 - Emergency Departments
- Perceived chemical dependency “trumps”
- Heavy Hearts

IMPLEMENTATION

What are our recommendations?

“There’s a lot of hope here” Hopes and Dreams from Interviews

1. Translation and interpretation services
2. Hire from within the community
3. More training for county service providers
4. Coordination of service providers
5. Skill developments
6. Career pathways to hire within the community
7. Engaging community organically and with humility

Recommendations

Increased efforts to hire Karen interpreters and service providers

- Potentially engaging Karen youth by providing pathways to employment within Ramsey County in general and Ramsey County Crisis in particular

Recommendations

More internal collaboration across Ramsey County service providers

- Partnering with other county service providers such as probation, child support, and youth engagement so that they know what crisis services Ramsey County provides
- More education across county service providers about external referrals available to support families

Recommendations

More community building and outreach outside of times of crisis between Ramsey County Crisis and Karen Community

- Work on and maintain contacts with community leaders including Karen Organization of Minnesota and religious leaders
- Have county workers attend Karen Organization of Minnesota Bi-monthly Karen Culture presentations and seek other opportunities to participate in cultural and community events and celebrations

Works Consulted

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